



MOTORBOOTY

**NUMBER EIGHT
WINTER 1995**

CONTENTS

- New Records By: the Unlistenable Unlistened To, the Never Heard of 'Ems, Phat Planet, Blind Mentality, Five Horse Johnson, Six Finger Satellite, Claw Hammer, the Art Ensemble of West Bloomfield, Junior Kimbrough, & R.L. Burnside (52)
- He's Got the Whole World in His Pants: The Ali Farka Touré Story (52)
- When Good Guys Form Bad Bands: How to Cope with Your Harmonically Challenged Friends
- Front Row Lollapalooza '95: I Went to See Hole But All I Saw Was Bush (52)
- Who's the Whitest Guy with the Skinniest Ass in Indie Rock? (52)
- Whatever Happened to Anyone Who's Ever Made a Rap Record? (52)
- The XXX Files: The Truth is Down There (52)
- I Can't Believe It's Not Duct Butter (52)
- Slouching Towards Bethlehem: On the Road with Judaica, Israel's Top Speed Metal Band (52)
- Special *Grand Royal* Pull-Out Supplement: Thurston Moore Ranks the Day Care Centers
Ricky Powell on the Crisis in the Balkans
Mike D. on His Ten Favorite Fabrics
Luscious Jackson Gets Down with Jesse Jackson

COVER

Color by John Hill

BACK ISSUES

Copies of MOTORBOOTY #6 (The "Mind Over Booty" issue) are still available for \$4 cheap

MOTORBOOTY WORLDWIDE COMMUNICATIONS

**PO BOX 02007
DETROIT, MI 48202**

**E-MAIL motorb@rust.net
<http://www.motorbooty.com/booty>**



STAFF DANCEY

Dancey

HARDCORE COMMITTEE

David Merline
Mike Rubin
Rob Michaels
Barry Henssler
Dan Rice

PLOTNICK

Plotnick

UNITED BOOTY WORKERS

Glenn Barr	Kaz
Pat Blashill	Terry LaBan
Lisa Brennan	Ron Laffitte
Shawn Brennan	Eric Lorey
Marianne Butler	Sue Lott
Terry Colon	Pat Mallick
Lloyd Dangle	Gary Michaels
Mike Danner	Matt O'Brien
Phil Dürr	Dave Rice
Jeremy Eaton	Scott Sterling
Mary Fleener	Chris Ware
Rob Graham	Dirk Waldegg
Andrew Heaton	Willy Wilson
Robin Holland	Derek Yip

Advertising Inquiries:

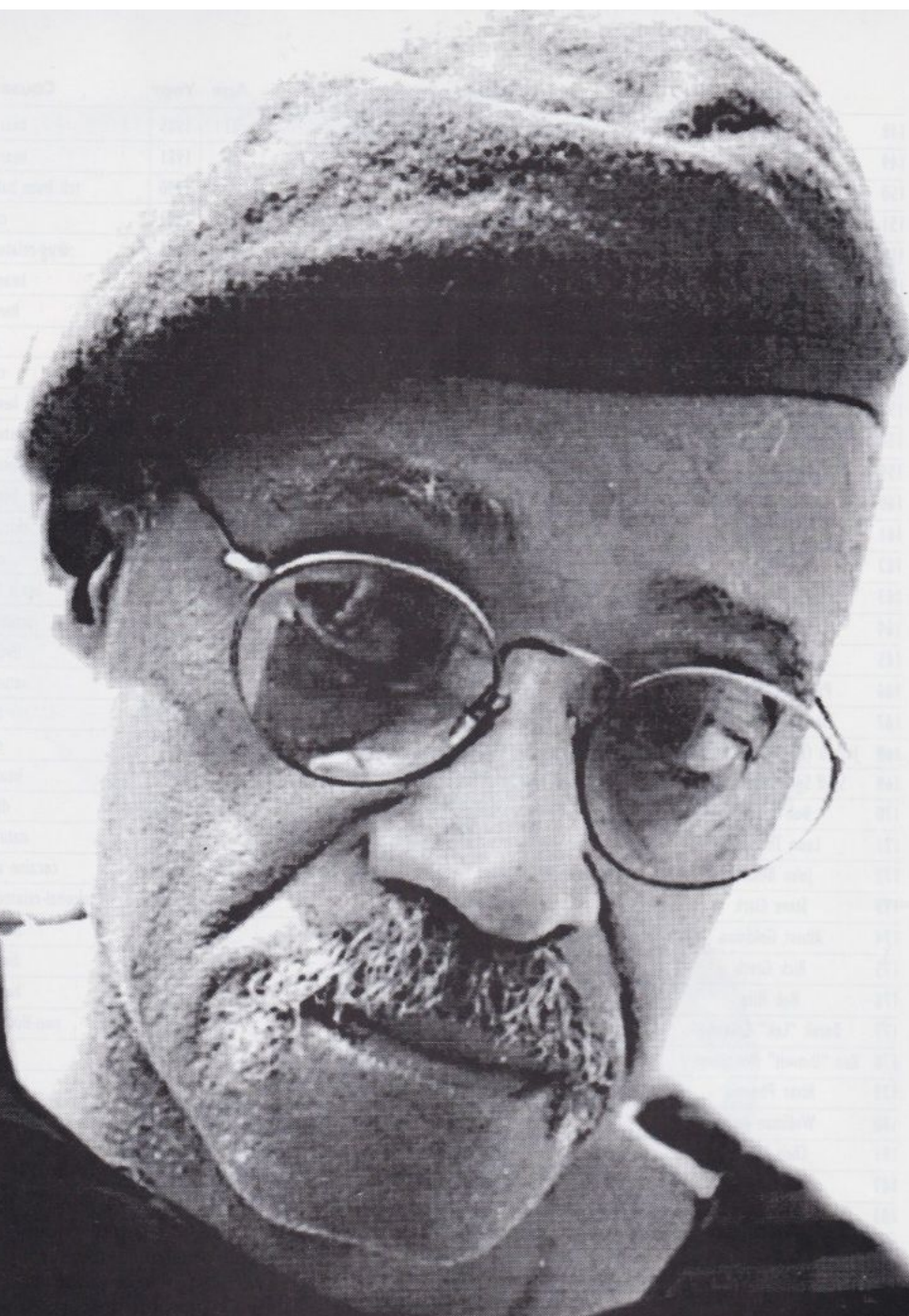
Contact Scott Hamilton (810) 399-9833

MOTORBOOTY #8, Winter 1995. MOTORBOOTY Magazine, "The Bad Penny of the Bozo Underground," is published at irregular intervals by MOTORBOOTY L.C. in the city you love to hate. Entire contents ©1995 MOTORBOOTY Magazine and respective authors, protected by the litigious zeal of qualified attorneys, so idea-strapped members of the publishing industry should look elsewhere for material to appropriate. Any similarity between actual somebodies and the contents of MOTORBOOTY is purely coincidental. Four-issue subscriptions available for sixteen dollars, except for persons at foreign addresses, who must pay considerably more. Please direct all correspondence, ad inquiries, and letters begging for merchandise to the address above.

AS SERIOUS AS
A HEART ATTACK:
A One-Way Conversation With

Melvin Van Peebles

interview by Mike Rubin and Derek Yip
photos by Pat Blashill



Navigator of an Air Force B-47 bomber, painter, cable-car gripman, novelist, gigolo, filmmaker, musician, composer, actor, playwright, Wall Street options trader—Melvin Van Peebles has worn enough hats successfully to have one hell of a swelled head. Born Melvin Peebles in Checkerboard City 64 years ago, the eminence greasy of the independent film community doesn't have a particularly large skull, but he'll be the first to tell you that his achievement-laden career is simply the result of always doing exactly as he pleases.

Van Peeble's 1967 debut feature *Story of a Three Day Pass* won him the Critic's Award at the San Francisco Film Festival and landed him a job at Columbia Pictures directing *Watermelon Man*, starring Godfrey Cambridge. Although the movie earned him the honor of being the first-ever black director of a Hollywood film (not counting prolific 1930s "race film" director

Oscar Micheaux), Van Peebles was frustrated by the restrictions imposed on him by studio bosses and cashed his *Watermelon* checks to become his own boss.

"Dedicated to all the brothers and sisters who had enough of the Man," Van Peebles' self-financed 1971 film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* was the incendiary salvo that lit the fuse of contemporary African American filmmaking. *Sweetback* was more of a raw experimental film than a work of "blaxploitation," which more correctly refers to movies starring black actors but produced and (most often) written and directed by whites. In contrast, Van Peebles was *Sweetback's* producer, director, writer, composer, and star, while the film was a revenge fantasy about the radicalization of a whorehouse stud who kills two cops after he witnesses them brutally beat a young nationalist. Made by the seat of MVP's britches for \$500,000, *Sweetback* went on to gross \$14 million, one of the first great

independent film success stories.

As the father of the post-war black film renaissance, Van Peebles' status is legendary, but fewer people know about his musical career. Beginning with *Brer Soul* in 1967, Van Peebles would go on to create nine albums, including five solo efforts, two film soundtracks, and two Broadway cast recordings. Rather than songs per se, Van Peebles' albums veer toward a spoken word approach that qualifies him as one of the forefathers of rap: theatrical vignettes, hysterical monologues, and lyrical soliloquies, all delivered in a gruff, tone-deaf bark that sounds like a drunken, funky uncle. Van Peebles' typically project-packed 1995 has already seen him write the screenplay for the film *Panther* (directed by son Mario), publish the novel the film was based on, return from a 20 year musical vacation with the album *Ghetto Gothic*, and finally allow *MOTORBOOTY* to corner him at his New York apartment.

MOTORBOOTY: What's your background?

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: I'm from the South Side of Chicago. I left there in 1949 at 16 when I went away to college.

You went away to college at 16?

Yeah, but I wasn't smart enough not to stay out of ROTC, so 13 days after I was out of college I was in the Air Force. I was supposed to be in for 18 months, but they kept increasing the time I had serve because of 'national security,' so I ended up spending three and a half years in the service. Two weeks after I got out, my troop crashed, and the guy who was sitting in my seat was burned to cinders.

I had saved some money from the service, so I went Mexico, where my eldest son Mario was born. I thought retirement in Mexico would be great, but after three weeks of laying around I was ready to blow my brains out. I worked in my Dad's tailor shop every day from when I was ten until when I left Chicago, which didn't give me a work ethic so much as it gave me a work routine. It's just something you do; you



Ol' Mushroom Lid from
Dont Play Us Cheap

don't even think about it. Leisure time wasn't something I had use for, so I never cultivated it. I remember once, many years later, Mario and I were playing basketball with a couple friends of ours, and Mario told me to get out there and throw me the ball and it bounced off my head. He said, 'Jesus, Dad! You're sagging!' but I told him, 'Son, I don't know how to play. I never got to play!'

At that time the greatest city was without a doubt San Francisco, so that's where I went. Even though I was a college graduate and I had all of these wings and medals, they didn't accept minorities in the cockpits of the airlines so I couldn't get a job there. Then I just asked myself, 'What would be the greatest job to have in San Francisco?'

A quake monitor?

Hmm, a quake monitor. I didn't think of that. No, I thought 'cable-car driver,' so I ended up driving cable cars. I noticed that they were a big tourist attraction, so I decided to write an article about it and get somebody to take pictures. Anyway the article turned into this whole

little book, and then I sold the book. One day somebody got on the cable car and wanted to get his book signed and he told me the book was just like a movie. I thought, 'Hmm, I guess I wanted a movie.' So that's how I decided to do movies. That and the fact that I was not happy with the images I was always seeing. I saw this movie where yet again some guy is humming this spiritual and sweat is pouring down his nose while he's being lynched, and some liberal guy is saying 'Oh, America must change,' and I was like, 'Fuck this shit. I'm tired of seeing this. Kick the motherfucker's ass!' So that image and the cable car thing prompted me to get into movies.

I didn't know anything about making movies. It's hard to understand that today because now there are film schools and everybody talks about film, but back then it was sort of like alchemy, some medieval science that just a few people knew about—like a guild for carving rocks on gothic churches or something. I calculated that I could make a feature film in 16mm for \$500. I had about that much in savings at that time, so I thought, 'Well, shit, I'm gonna do it.' I decided to divide it into three short films, because I thought I would do better keeping it small that way. However, there are other little things that I forgot all about. You've got to develop the film, you've got to get other copies, you've got to have another print made. I had to sell my car, I had to take on another job, and so on and so on.

Finally I finished the shooting on my first 30 minute film. I went down to the basement, and some guy gave me Eisenstein's *Film and Form* and showed me how to glue it together. That was the extent of my formal cinema education. Then I realized that I needed a soundtrack, but the musicians I knew were unreliable or unusable, so that's how I went into music. Since I couldn't play an instrument I got a kazoo. I played my soundtrack and hummed the other parts.

I went down to Hollywood with my three short films under my arm and said, 'I'd like a job.' They said, 'Fine, you can be an elevator operator.' I was like, 'No, you don't understand. I want to write and direct.' They kept giving me the runaround, until one guy took me aside and said, 'Look, we don't have any black people here, your people are not ready yet for the industry, and the industry's not ready for you'—you know, the whole separate but equal bullshit. But I insisted, so he offered me a job as a dancer. I left.

Broken-hearted, I went back to my second love, which was astronomy. I moved to Holland to gain my Ph.D in astronomy. Through luck, the Cinematheque in France saw my first three films and I got a postcard from France saying, 'You're a genius. What are you doing buried in astronomy?' I was like, 'Shit!' so I went to France. The French met me with a limo, took me to the Champs-Élysées, and then projected my films. They all 'oohed' and 'aahed' over me and kissed me, then they drove off. So there I was, in the middle of the Champs-Élysées with two wet cheeks, no money, and three cans of film. Still, I decided, 'Well, okay, I'm gonna make it. I'm gonna be a filmmaker.'

THE MUSIC OF MELVIN by Derek Yip

Brer Soul (A&M 1968)

Van Peebles took advantage of the fact that A&M was a label without a significant roster of black artists to convince them to relinquish creative control to him. The result was a brilliant quasi-concept album of intricate theatrical narratives told from the viewpoints of various ghetto characters, all delivered over protean free-jazz rumblings that periodically get blown to pieces by barrages of dissonance. For example, the title subject of "Lilly Done



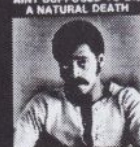
the Zampoughi
Everytime I Pulled
Her Coattail"
(partially based
on an actual MVP
sexploit), springs
into an exuberant
post-coital dance
that cues the
background jazz
to suddenly burst
into ensemble

bedlam. The joys of sex shift quickly into "Hey Joe" territory, however, when Lilly is caught doing the "Z" with other menfolk, and the song evolves into a flutey-reverberated eulogy from her jealous lover/murderer. Elsewhere, "Catch That On the Corner" finds a blind pencil pusher entranced by the sweet smell of crossdress, leaving him all hot and bothered for a description of the ho. The bass mounts some serious JB's rhythm and the horn section blows funeral tones before the album cathartically recedes in a horny dirge, the sightless man desperately imploring "Come on baby rap to me!" above the din. Altogether, *Brer Soul* expresses a variety of emotions, from the poetically poignant to the heatedly political (the author's "Free Huey" sentiment on the back cover would later be transposed onto thousands of campus buttons), plus a heaping helping of (literally) black humor almost as funny as the cover photo of Melvin's impersonation of a mudflap.

Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death (A&M 1969)

Its title cribbed from Frederick Douglass' famous aphorism "A slave ain't supposed to die a natural death" (translated into MVP's

AIN'T SUPPOSED TO DIE
A NATURAL DEATH



MELVIN VAN PEEBLES
(BRER SOUL)

trademark apostrophe-eschewing style). Aint proffers up more impressionistic slices-of-ghetto-life in place of *Brer Soul*'s narrative cohesion. Electric harpsichord

implodes the endorphin-inducing "Come On Feet Do Your Thing," with a bassline keeping time to the heartbeat of a sprinting brother about to be snuffed out by pig artillery; MVP would later recycle this workout to scintillating effect during *Sweetback's* chaotic chase scenes. "Funky Girl on Motherless Broadway," an intentionally off-key interpolation of the traditional "Motherless Children," is buoyed by effervescent tuba as a transvestite harlot turns tricks and cracks wise ("You

know what balling is?/It's a poot in old death's face"), while "Put a Curse On You" ambles the hoodoo down over a solitary beat, abetted by horns and guitar, as the narrator casts a spell of ghetto deterioration on the vanilla 'burbs: "Put a curse on you/May all your children end up junkies too."

Sequence always being a priority for MVP, the redoubtable "Salamaggy's Birthday" closes out the album and envelops you in the claustrophobic ballad of a bad lieutenant. Lyrically one of the starkest songs ever about protecting and serving, the befunked indictment of officers both black and white forcing a streetwalker to give them complimentary suckoffs becomes more vicious as the cops get sardonic about it: "Smile brown sugar/Smile if you know what's good for you." With grimmer visuals than the bleakest headcracking moments of Ralph Bakshi's *Coonskin* strung together, this is from the hard-cocks school of dissent—most certainly not a Richie Havens protest song by a long shot.

Watermelon Man (soundtrack) (Beverly Hills 1970)

Though *Watermelon Man* was not his own creation, MVP insisted on producing his own soundtrack music. Departing from his usual recitation, MVP croons heartily, albeit futilely on the "Heard It Through the Grapevine" bastardization "Soul'd On You," where he yelps at his most tone-deaf extreme, with femme background vocal schmaltz, prominent rock guitar, and horns all pasted on for good displeasure. It's no surprise that this song was never used in the film, unlike "Love, That's America," the sarcastic lead number ("This ain't America/You can't fool me/This here's the land of the sheriff/Not the home of the free"). The wealth of guffaws stirred up from a viewing of *Watermelon Man* doesn't come close to the camp quotient of actress Estelle Parsons' quavering vocals trying to cut through "Where Are the Children," an atrocity that was actually MVP's idea. Despite having the poignant lyrics marred by cheesy background vocal arrangements (which sound like an afterthought added on to camouflage the songs' weak lead vocals), this is still an album to be sought out if only for its sheer outlandishness, as well as for 13-year-old Mario Van Peebles' almost psychedelic back-cover collage.

Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (Original Soundtrack) (Stax 1971)

Clips of the film's dialogue track, sparser than the hair on Bono's head, form the segues between the songs on this urban opera, starting with the squishy sounds of 14-year-old Mario Van Peebles as a precocious "Sweet-back Losing His Cherry." (Part of an acting vanguard that later included Traci Lords, Mario showed his gratitude for the freebie by projecting Pops'



**SWEET SWEETBACK'S
BAADASSSSS SONG**



What kind of work did you do to make money, stuck there in France?

I became a beggar. I got a kazoo, so I'd stand there playing "Take This Hammer" and "La Bamba," holding out my hat. I learned to speak a little French, and like Blanche Du Bois, I've always counted on the kindness of strangers. There was a bull market for virile young men, so.... You could always meet up with some countess, but I never went with countesses because they didn't have anything to do all day, so they'd drag you to an island in Greece or the ballet. I devised a system where I would go with a different working girl one day a week, and I would stagger each one's day off so I'd have the rest of the day free. I'd go at night and I'd have the rest of the day free to write all day. I'd see one girl the one day, the next girl the next day, and the next girl the next day. They were feeding me and giving me a place to sleep; that was all I needed.

There was a French law that said that a French writer could have a director's card, so I began to learn French, and I became one of the editors of a French humor magazine.

What is 'French humor'?

How the fuck should I know? It's the same as American, I guess. Listen, I published five novels in French, and then I went to the Cinema Center and said, "I write in French, I'm a French writer, right? So give me my director's card, motherfucker." I had written this one story, *La Permission*, and I managed to find the money to film it. To make a long story short, I came back to the States in 1967 as the French delegate to the San Francisco Film Festival. The festival didn't know I was an American, let alone a black guy. I was the first modern black guy to make a feature, and that caused a great deal of embarrassment to Hollywood. People were like, "Why are you over there working? Why aren't you here?" I was like, "Give me a break. Last time I asked you to give me a job, you wanted me to be an elevator operator. What the fuck are you talking about?" They were like, "Well, there's been some changes, blah, blah, blah," the usual bullshit.

So all of a sudden everybody in Hollywood was offering me a job. I refused, because if I had taken the jobs, they would have had the one black threat under wraps. In the meantime, I was living in New York on a park bench in front of the Women's House of Detention on Tenth and Greenwich. That's where the song "Tenth and Greenwich" on *Brer Soul* comes from: I would listen to people calling up to their girlfriends in the jail, and the whole song comes from the dialogue I overheard.

I eventually agreed to make *Watermelon Man* if they would let me shoot in Harlem, and I also managed to make a major break in the unions: I made them take on minority apprentices, or otherwise I wouldn't do the film.

You were already doing records at this time, right?

Right. Even though I couldn't read or write music I was pretty conversant in it because I had done the soundtracks for my short films. I



A daring affront to olfactory mores

invented my own composing technique by numbering the piano keys, humming notes, finding their place on the keyboard, and jotting down the corresponding numbers. Musicians then identified the notes—"Oh that's a D-sharp with a 13th minor, that's sneaky"—and wrote out the actual tabulation sheets. I was always saying, "Play the words instead of the notes. Play the feeling of the words." For example, "Catch-that-on-the-corner, bop-bop-bup-bip-baa-bop." After the message of the words had been set up, it was okay to play the music without the message. They would still hear "Catch-that-on-the-corner."

When I was a kid, my mother decided I was going to take piano. I was doing "Chopsticks," and the teacher was like, "Oh, he's doing so well, he ought to start composing music himself." I came back the next week and did my little thing, and she was like, "Give me a break, you've got to be able to do better than that." The same thing happened the next week. The third week I played the same way, and she whacked me. The fourth week she went to my mother and said, "I shouldn't have praised him. He's not doing his theory. He keeps playing this weird stuff." My mother said, "Oh no, no, no, he's been working very hard. He's always practicing at it." The teacher said, "Oh my God," and she hugged me and apologized for having whacked me, but she told my mother, "He's learning his lessons by rote. He's tone deaf, and I didn't realize it. He'll never be a musician so there's no need to keep wasting your money." So that was the end of my formal music career.

Jump cut: Years later I walk in a bar and I almost started to cry. I heard what sounded to me like my first composition being played. It was "Little Rootie Tootie" by Thelonious Monk. The teacher assumed I was just fucking off, but I was hearing dissonance and that's what I was playing.

There's another story about my days on the piano. There was this girl named Betty—I won't reveal her last name in case the poor child might subscribe to MOTORBOOTY—



MVP circa 1973

and she was taking piano lessons at the same time, and I liked Betty and she liked me. But Betty had this terrible habit of whatever you said to her, she would repeat three times louder. So we'd be sitting there, with her parents in the other room, and I'd whisper, 'Hey Betty, how about a kiss?' And she'd go, 'How about a kiss? How about a kiss? HOW ABOUT A KISS?!' She got my ass kicked on a couple of occasions.

Anyway, when I came back to the States in 1967, in the middle of all this upheaval, I was surprised by the dearth of urban protest songs. Dylan was saying some things, but all the rest were 'lolly-pop,' singing about things like happy plantations, and I didn't find these songs grounded in reality. The forms that were available—straight blues or straight spirituals or ballads—didn't fit, so I invented another form, sort of like the German *sprechstimme* where you chant and say these things. This was picked up by the Last Poets, then Gil Scott-Heron, and then later L.L. Cool J and on and on and on. That was the true origin of rap. Yet nobody except Grace Jones and Denny, the black guy from Sha Na Na, has ever covered any of my songs. I guess my delivery is a little too 'quirky' for them. If I had sung the songs sweetly, or in a more traditional manner, people could get caught up in the tradition of the words rather than what the words were saying, and I didn't want that. Also, I minimized the music because I wanted people to focus on the message.

What was the public reaction to Brer Soul, considering there was no precedent for anything like it at the time?

'Wow!' Lyrical, spoken word, poetry, they didn't know what to call it. The repercussions of the style have far, far exceeded its sales, a thousand times coming.

Your records are more than just out-of-print; they're practically apocryphal.

They didn't publish Melville until after he was dead. (Actually, most of Melville's works were published in his lifetime—ed.)

Do you have any plans to reissue your albums?

I don't have any plans. At one stage A&M was talking about it, but right now you can't even find *Ghetto Gothic* because I had some problems with Capitol: the guy who's the head of promotions decided that he knew what black music was supposed to sound like, and my record wasn't what it was supposed to sound like. The iconoclast, whether he's black or white, is always given a hard time; that situation is only exacerbated by the fact that I'm black. It's not quite accurate to say that I'm a militant; I just want what the fuck I want. If you don't like it, fuck you.

Why did you stop making records after What the....You Mean I Can't Sing? in 1974?

Nobody offered me a deal where they'd leave me alone.

Why did you choose to return now, and why did you choose Capitol?

They offered me a deal that would leave me alone, and as far as production went, I got exactly what I wanted. However, after that, things were different. It didn't fit into the urban niche that someone thought it should have, so it was ignored.

It seemed like Capitol only worked the record about two minutes. The person I spoke to at the record company said they 'weren't working the project anymore.'

'Anymore' is a euphemism. They never worked it. The press was good, but there was no airplay. The label acted embarrassed and didn't return my calls.

Did you have—

Let's talk about my movies. They told me, 'A black film has never made money.' I said, 'Well, how would you know? You've never made a black film. You've just made white fantasies that you think black people wanted to see.' So I set out on my own to make *Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*.

First I needed a studio, but none of the normal studios would talk to me, so one morning I looked in the mirror while I was shaving and said, 'Melvin, you are now a studio.' I did it myself, and I had no partners in anything. Not because I was some great financial genius, but just because no one would come in with me. Years later, some little guy asked me, 'Mr. Van Peebles, how did you get to the top?' I told him the truth: 'No one would let me in at the bottom.'

Did your inspiration for Sweetback really come when you went out to the Mojave Desert and masturbated in the brush?

The specifics of the inspiration might have come then, no pun intended. I knew there were other ways of doing a film, and the realization ran out of me at that specific moment, in a spurt of genius.

No pun intended.

Whatever. So then I made *Sweetback*, which changed the whole landscape. Afterwards I was more or less blackballed, because what I was suggesting was very dangerous. If this

film on a video screen during a *New Jack City* sex scene.) From the Bobby Byrd kitchen of fatback-cooking comes "Hoppin' John," a soul stew replete with "Groove" Holmes organ-pumping, and "Mojo Woman," a rambunctious nod to LaVern Baker, complemented by barrelhouse piano and Muscle Shoals rhythm. The soundtrack's crowning achievement, however, is etched into the seven-and-a-half minute banded grooves of the meditatively taut "Sweetback's Theme" by a then-embryonic Earth, Wind & Fire: a simmering soup of saxophones, handclaps, bass-keyboard pulse, and a funkified trumpet sample of "Won't Bleed Me" (a call-and-response spiritual that also appears separately on this soundtrack). The theme was justifiably released as a single (now available on a Stax-Volt CD box), before being ultimately coopted for more whitebread consumption as the *Barney Miller* theme.

As Serious as a Heart-Attack (A&M 1972)

Although this is the album where the Brer Soul moniker was mothballed, Melvin was at this point living a lifestyle worthy of his alter ego. An atypical crash-pad vagabond, he would spend his days working in the offices of his theatrical producers, hang out with the likes of Cab Calloway at night, then wind up at the crib of one of any number of wealthy mistresses. It was nothing short

As serious as a heart-attack
Melvin Van Peebles



of amazing then, that between the promotion of his musical and *Sweetback*, plus the scripting of *Dont Play Us Cheap*, he managed to knock off this album. Although there's the added feature of background vocals,

As Serious as a Heart-Attack is MVP's most barrenly arranged record, almost completely dispensing with the jazz instrumentation. "Rufus & Ruby," scythes through the "Countryside" of the LP like *Sounder* gone amuck: percolating drums and pounding ivories barrel through the story of a slave sniping the plantation owner and his henchmen as they head down to fetch his girl, the owner's designated "new big house plaything."

The "Cityside" offers the scathing social sarcasm of "Just Dont Make No Sense," one blood's attack on vapid urban transportation ("I don't get me a seat the revolution is here/You step on these feet and the revolution is right now") and "Dear Mistuh P," a con's missive to Tricky Dick seeking equal robber-unity employment ("We're in the same business you see/You're just a little more successful than me"). MVP saves the heaviest hitter, "My Pal Johnny," for last. A hyper-Iceberg Slim scenario—wherein junkies get smoked by the song's narrator in a shooting gallery fronting for a Black Power HQ—it leaves the entire platter reeking of cordite before the needle glides off.

Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death (Original Broadway Cast) (A&M 1972)

Subtitled "Tunes From Blackness" this theatrical version of Van Peebles' songs opened in 1971. Refusing to fold the show even as it was flopping from a black-press backlash in reaction to *Sweetback*, the playwright instigated a grass-roots promotion campaign—i.e., he stood outside the Ethel Barrymore Theatre wearing his "Rated 'X' by an All-White Jury" tee while passing out

leaflets, at one point even corraling guest luminaries such as Ossie Davis, Nippy Russell, and the Coz to perform in the show. Word-of-mouth spread, and the musical ended up netting a profit by the time it closed as the fifth-longest-running show on Broadway. In the words of the man himself: "Fiddler had better move over."

No song from *Brer Soul and Aint* (the A&M LP) was left uninterpreted on this two-record cast album. The arrangements are straight-up covers of the originals, and for the most part the tunes benefit from having different voices distinguishing each character, with some gender changes adding a wholly different take on songs like "Tenth and Greenwich," where a lesbian hollers to her incarcerated lover. The polish of the playing on "Salamaggi's Birthday" just doesn't jibe with the rawness of the topic. Ditto the flushed arrangement of "Lilly Done the Zampoughi Everytime I Pulled Her Coattail," with a pre-SNL Garrett Morris' svelte voice being nowhere near as effective as Brer Soul's own gruff reminiscence. Still, to paraphrase Dylan, the geek handed Mr. Jones the naked bone, a *Three Penny Opera* of the urban black consciousness, and Mr. Jones nominated it for two Grammys in 1973, as producer and composer.

***Dont Play Us Cheap (Original Cast)* (Stax 1973)**

An adaptation of MVP's novel *La Fete a Harlem*, *Don't Play Us Cheap* opened as a comedy musical on Broadway in 1972, while *Aint Supposed* the musical was simultaneously continuing its run a few blocks away. Having two musicals running on Broadway concurrently was the pinnacle of MVP's theatrical success, but the triumph was short-lived: *Dont Play Us Cheap* floundered and reportedly its self-taught playwright lost \$100,000 on the project. Anticipating by a decade and a half Charles Burnett's *To Sleep With Anger's* theme of family virtue in the face of outside evil, *Dont Play Us Cheap* follows two imps who have to win their horns from the devil by successfully crashing a Harlem party one uptown Saturday night.

The resulting double LP set of quirky gospel featured ensemble singing on every upbeat song, in marked contrast to the hard-edged austerity of the soliloquies on the *Aint Supposed* cast album. Joshie Jo Armstead belts out the celestial lead-off cut "You Cut Up the Clothes in the Closet of My Dreams," featuring Aretha-style pipes that blow all ecumenical proselytizing into next Tuesday. The rollicking B.B. King bluesy warmth on "The Book of Life" shuns the fantasy-is-reality concept to "take my lesson from the page of living," while Esther Rolle's good-timey hum-along spiritual on "It Makes No Difference" takes your overworked rump on an "Oh Happy Day" excursion that's pure dy-no-mite.



film became the highest-grossing independent film ever made, then a lot of these guys—who said that you had to have five dialogue coaches and twelve ass-techs or whatever—would be out of a fucking job. I had done it without them. Plus, there was the whole 'terrible militancy' of this new voice that had scared the shit out of everybody. Hollywood wanted the money but they didn't want the political implications, so that ushered in the blaxploitation era, which just took the more cartoonish elements and pushed them. They were fun cartoons, but they had a subliminal counterrevolutionary message.

People often refer to *Sweetback* as a blaxploitation film. What's your reaction to that?

Oh, it's not that at all. It ushered in the era, but it's not blaxploitation at all.

How would you define blaxploitation?

I wouldn't. I'm not required to.

What inspired your editing style in *Sweetback*? Some of the quick cutting looks like it was influenced by avant-garde films.

You mean MTV before MTV? The truth is that I just did what I liked. I always do what I like. There used to be a thing in *Mad* magazine called 'Scenes You'd Love to See in the Movies.' Anyway, when I was doing *Sweetback*, I put in that duel scene at the biker gang's headquarters where the bikers ask, 'Choose your weapon.' Usually guys would say 'ping pong' or 'knives' or 'a race' or something, but I was thinking, what would you just die to see *Sweetback* say? Then I'd have him do that. So the answer was: 'Fucking.'

I read that your girlfriend at the time of *Sweetback* broke up with you because you used Mario in the opening scene of young *Sweetback* losing his cherry. What was Mario's reaction?

He was a little nervous. I remember him asking me one day, 'Is this movie gonna be an "X" dad?' I said, 'Yeah, sure, it's gonna be an "X."' He said, 'Phew, 'cause I don't want the kids at school to see my butt.'

Did you have any shyness on the set shooting your own love-making scenes?

Shit, man, that was the least of my worries. Half of the guys didn't know what a fucking camera was, I had lookout guys with guns posted because of the union—the acting was the last of my fucking worries.

I heard that you actually got the clap on the set.

Yeah, and I applied for workmen's compensation, and you know what? I got it.

When you were making *Sweetback*, you got around the union rules by telling everyone in the industry that you were making a porn film. What was your reaction when the film actually came back with an 'X' rating?

One lie had nothing to do with the other. If it



Imps looking like pimps from the cover of *Dont Play Us Cheap*

had been about Mary's little lamb, it still would have been an 'X.' That was the point I was bringing home. I refused to have the white jury judging what was fit for black viewers, and any film you didn't submit got an 'X'. It's difficult to explain with modesty the impact of what I've done. Now they've changed the makeup of the jury: you have Asians, women, blacks, Latinos, etc., and that stems directly from my saying, 'Fuck you, it's rated "X" by an all-white jury.' I still don't understand your question, though.

I just wondered about the irony of that scenario.

I don't deal in irony! I just deal in business.

Why did you choose to open *Sweetback* in Detroit?

Only two theaters in the United States would show the movie. One was in Detroit, and one was in Atlanta. You see this vest I have on? This vest comes from the Goldberg Twins, who ran the Grand Circus Theater in Detroit. I made them a bet that *Sweetback* was going to do better than any movie they'd had there before, and the payoff would be a new suit. This is the vest from that suit.

I know that you were down to your last \$26 when Bill "No Toilet Talk" Cosby loaned you \$50,000 to finish *Sweetback*. Did you ever get any feedback from him as to what he thought of the film?

That's not what I deal in. You're coming at life from a whole different place. You're coming at life saying, 'Why did this blah, blah, blah?' and 'Why did that blah, blah, blah?' I don't do that shit. If you bother me, I say, 'Leave me alone.' If you keep bothering me, I kick your ass. It's like when little kids used to ask me, 'When did you decide you wanted to be a playwright?' It had never dawned on me that I was a playwright. I was just trying to stay out of the post office. When you look at it from this end of the stick, this all makes complete sense. From the other end of the stick, it seems, 'My goodness, how could you have chosen that?'



Letting the good times Rolfe in *Dont Play Us Cheap*

Why was the *Sweetback* soundtrack album on Stax, since you still had another record on your A&M contract?

I went to A&M and they felt that the movie was anti-Semitic or something and they didn't want to be associated with it. You must understand, *Sweetback* was very shocking. Also, soundtracks weren't what they are now. That was a whole other thing that I had invented: the use of the soundtrack as a selling tool. I figured I could write a hit tune, get the tune played, and put people in the seats. Made sense to me, but that hadn't been done before. *Shaft* later used the same technique and the rest is history.

There's such a theatrical vibe to your songs, especially on *Brer Soul*, where each number is a little narrative vignette. Where did that come from? Were any of those characters people you knew, or was it all purely from your imagination?

I sang about all these other aspects of the urban experience that aren't allowed to surface commercially. It's not all just 'Hey let's fuck' or 'Hey I'ma beat you upside your head.' That's still the problem with rap and other urban music—the larger spectrum of life isn't being dealt with musically.

Would you like to see *Dont Play Us Cheap* or *Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death* brought back as a Broadway revival?

Of course I'd like that. But I own my own projects, so there's no boy's club to keep regurgitating my stuff. Talk about irony: I said I don't deal in irony, but it's still ironic that people have taught whole college courses on nothing but *Sweetback*, but the film still hasn't shown foreign, still hasn't been rereleased, etc., etc. People are just not in the habit of dealing with black people. When I finished *Sweetback*, I had to hire a white guy to pretend to be boss just to sell the damn thing. It's all very well to say 'Why don't you do this?,' but you cannot ignore the overriding white factors making many of these decisions. Which is very frustrating to many of the people without as many arrows in their quiver as myself,

because then they're stymied.

Do you ever see a day when you might be welcomed back into Hollywood on a project?

It could happen, I guess.

What's your theory of Hollywood as a plantation?

The business of America, compounded with racist theories—subliminal racist theories—is just what Hollywood is. It's just what all of America is. People try to make distinctions between Hollywood and the military and the business world and this and that, but nyaah: it's all the same.

You were the first black trader on the floor of the American Stock Exchange. Do you consider that incongruous with your work as an artist and the public perception of you as being a radical?

Not at all. As a matter of fact, I never perceived myself as a radical at all. I just got a gun and shot the bullets, that's all.

Well, generally people consider *Wall Street* as being—

Fuck what people generally consider! And incongruous? If you put together the money from nothing to make a film in a language and a country that you don't even know about, well, then you know about finance.

What do you think about the way that Mario's films have large mainstream acceptance versus what you had to go through? He's got the huge commercial releases that you never had, with thousands of theaters opening his films simultaneously across the country.

I feel personally that I made a lot of that possible, and that's great.

Given your experience, is there any advice that you'd give to a young director coming up now?

No. Learn your craft the best that you can. Luck is using an opportunity and meeting it with practice.

What inspired you to get the dotted-line tattoo around your neck?

Now, it's interesting that you continually use the word 'inspire.' With you guys, everything seems to spring forth from positive, golden vibes. . . shit, man. Anyway, I was at a point where I had a substantial amount of money, and you're usually intimidated by old wives' tales that money will change you. I was in the Dorchester Hotel in London and my chauffeur called me and said, 'Mr. Van Peebles, sign along the dotted line.' So I thought I would have this tattoo put around me where I could see it every morning and it would remind me of what I had gone through in case I ever turned mealy-mouthed. That's why I did it.

It's in both French and English?

Yes. It says 'lynch here' on this side, 'cut along the dotted line' in French on this side, and then on my ass, in a West African language called Bambara, it says 'Ni bessé': 'If you can, motherfucker.' ■

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES



What The... You Mean I Can't Sing?
(Atlantic 1974)

This album does not hold together as well as the others, being weighed down with the Bukowski-like

drawls of "So Many Bars," and the two songs of loss on side two: the sap-fest of "Eyes On the Rabbit," about a breakup with a kindergarten teacher, and the endless "My Love Belongs to You," with a catatonic Mario repeating the rhythm vocal ad infinitum. The songs aren't terrible, just far too personal—hard to believe that the militant muthafucka a cowering status quo once threatened to assassinate is heard virtually sobbing his way through tunes in a manner that would have Natalie Merchant basting in jealousy. Much better are the overtly political "A Birth Certificate Aint Nothing But a Death Warrant Anyway," a poke in the pupils of Uncle Toms everywhere, the wah-wah funk of "Come On Write Me," and the tongue-in-cheek modest proposal "Save the Watergate 500" ("Long live immunity/dont give a stoolie a mic").

Melvin closed out the '70s working mostly in television. Musically his projects ranged from purportedly managing a paraplegic country-funker by the name of Laughing Luther Beauford to producing Becky, a musical version of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* which was supposed to be staged in London starring Glenda Jackson.

Ghetto Gothic (Capitol 1995)

Postulating that contemporary listeners are more capable of comprehending both messages and music together than back in the Old School days, Melvin expanded the instrumentation of these songs on his first album in over 20 years. As theory in practice, his comeback is a bit too eager to meet those expectations, mistakenly submerging his songs in post-hip-hop overproduction; the result is that



the cuts that work are fine but the ones that don't—what's up with the karaoke version of "Greasy Lightnin'"?—are about as innovative as something you'd find on Neil Young's *Trans*. Melvin, who once bemoaned the fact there were no mature songs embodying black life that didn't slip into "Oh, baby I love you" mode, here rasps "Aaaaawwww babeeeee" through the opening cut "Blinded By Your Stuff." The touching "On 115," a tune about hoop dreams gone the way of the big H, thankfully keeps the arrangement down to sax, piano, and guitar. Four other decent tracks work a similar effect, which is our way of saying that listeners should hit the fast-forward button four times fast; those anal enough to ignore this advice will be subjected to a reworking of "There," with MVP sounding so much like Redd Foxx in cardiac arrest mode you'll be left wondering whether he hasn't confused songs of lament with songs of Lamont. (Sanford, not Dozier.) Nevertheless, you gotta give old Van his props for getting the thing out at all when most of his peers are either content with bingo or just plain incontinent. ■